DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 382 863 CE 069 021

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TITLE An International Perspective of U3A and the Prospect for Developments in Australasia in the Years Ahead.
PUB DATE Apr 95
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the U3A Canberra Conference (Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia, April 26-28, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Adult Programs; Articulation (Education); Foreign Countries; *Information Networks; International Programs; *Lifelong Learning; Older Adults; *Participation; Program Costs; *Program Development; Self Directed Groups; *Self Help Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Australasia; *Universities of the Third Age

ABSTRACT

In 1995, there were 107 universities of the third age (U3As) in Australia (up from 104 in 1994) and Australian membership in U3A groups totaled 26,346 (compared to 20,788 in 1994). U3A membership in New Zealand was also up. In view of the increasing popularity of U3As in Australasia and the success of U3A networks in a number of countries (including France and the United Kingdom), the establishment of an Australian U3A information network has been discussed. Concern has been expressed that establishment of a national U3A network would ultimately lead to regulation and loss of autonomy. The benefits of teleconferencing in permitting information exchange between U3As located great distances from one another have been cited; however, the high cost of teleconferencing would likely prove a major obstacle in the creation of an Australasian U3A network. Recent studies of the demographics of U3A participation and the increasing trend toward participation in adult education later in life have indicated that the popularity of U3As will not likely be transitory. The feasibility establishing and using a U3A network as a vehicle for constituency research and increasing the links between U3As and tertiary education has also been discussed. (MN)

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An international perspective of U3A and the prospect for developments in Australasia in the years ahead

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Paper presented at the U3A Canberra Conference
26-28 April 1995, Canberra, ACT, Australia.

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An international perspective of U3A and the prospect for developments in Australasia in the years ahead

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It would not be difficult to swamp these conference proceedings with masses of data about U3As internationally. To avoid doing this I have omitted the first part of my conference paper, which outlined developments in U3A and U3A-like organisations by country. Instead, for this information, readers are referred to a paper entitled "An international perspective on the University of the Third Age" by Richard Swindell and Jean Thompson, to be published in the journal "Educational Gerontology" in the latter part of 1995. That paper will provide an overview of U3As around the world, in considerably greater detail than I was able to cover at the conference.

This paper will concentrate on a number of ideas which might point to new directions for U3As in this region, in the years ahead.

Australian and NZ U3As in 1995

In the decade since U3A was introduced to Australia the movement has spread rapidly throughout all States and Territories and, more recently, has established a substantial niche in many of New Zealand's major cities. The self-help approach to adult education has hit a responsive note with older adults who want to stimulate their intellects and mix with lively, like-minded people. Tables 1 and 2, which appear in the U3A Directory 1995 (Swindell, 1995), give some idea of the vitality of the movement.

Table 1: 1994 and 1995 U3A membership for Australia and NZ

	1994	1995	Change	% Change
Number of U3A groups in Australia	104	107	3	
Total Australian membership	20788	26346	6158	30
Number of U3A groups in NZ	11	15	4	
Total NZ membership	1240	1682	442	36

In some cases the data appearing in Tables 1 and 2 represent a distorted picture of the real growth. Information in the Directory is based on self reporting. If a U3A group is unable to provide "census" information before the end of March each year, membership data for the previous year is repeated. If information is not provided for two consecutive years the U3A group listing is deleted from the Directory. In 1994, a number of the smaller U3As in Victoria were in the latter category. Thus, although U3A membership is probably growing faster in Victoria than in most other Australian regions, the 68% growth figure reported in Table 2 to have taken place between 1994 and 1995 also reflects more complete information than was provided in 1994. The NZ figures do not seem to be inflated by any such artifice.

Table 2: Membership details by State/Territory

	1994	1995	Change	% Change
Northern Territory				
Number of U3A groups	1	1	0	
Membership	180	180		
NSW				
Number of groups	17	21	4	
Membership	4663	6138	1475	32
ACT				
Number of groups	1	1	0	
Membership	700	700		
Victoria				
Number of groups	40	47	7	
Membership	5252	8830	3578	68
Queensland				
Number of groups	18	20	2	
Membership	6284	6988	704	11
SA				
Number of groups	9	8		
Membership	1077	1226	149	14
WA				
Number of groups	3	4	-1	
Membership	788	868	80	10
Tas				
Number of groups	6	6	0	
Membership	1244	1416	172	14

The encouraging trend for late life adult education in Australasia is that consistent growth has occurred in U3As every year. Even during the 1991-1993 period, which was widely reported to be the worst global recession for many decades, new U3A groups appeared, and established groups expanded. The self-help model in which all expert assistance is freely provided by members, largely without direct financial support, appears impervious to the problems which confront most adult education organisations when financial times become difficult. These data argue strongly that U3A in Australasia is no transient phenomenon but, rather, that it is a serious educational enterprise which will likely continue to prosper.

U3A Networks

AIUTA. The International Association of U3As began in France in 1975. Originally, membership was constrained only to those U3As which followed the French U3A model, i.e., those closely associated with a university and whose courses are taught by paid university teachers. Since 1992, however, financial problems and the growing success of the self-help or British model have persuaded AIUTA to try to broaden its charter. Official meetings are now conducted in languages other than French. In addition, two levels of membership are now possible; titular membership for individual U3As affiliated

with universities, and associate membership for the kinds we have here and in the U.K. Only titular members have full voting rights. The annual membership fee is currently 800Ff (about A$225) which goes to support a secretariat, publication of a regular newsletter (frequently in French), a clearing house of U3As internationally, international U3A conferences, and other activities. Major AIUTA projects for 1995 include the production of two films about U3A, one a 6 minute "imaginative overview", the other a longer film about U3As around the world.

Potentially, AIUTA is a powerful international lobby group on behalf of the educational rights of older people everywhere. It has access to organisations like UNESCO, WHO, and the Council of Europe. Currently it has more than 1700 titular and associate members worldwide and its aim is to represent all U3As in major international forums. However, despite recent attempts to liberalise, AIUTA will likely have to adopt a much more worldly view of Third Age education than it shows at present if it is to convince many Australasian groups that the annual membership fee is worth paying. As an example of the difficulties it faces in overcoming traditionalist views, in 1994 a U3A-like group in Canada, which is formally associated with a tertiary institution, applied for full membership. Despite fairly intense lobbying from newer members of AIUTA the application was vetoed by Francophone countries on AIUTA council.

The self-help approach to U3A has shown itself to be a vibrant, adult education movement which thrives without any formal guidance or advice from external bodies. Moreover, international communication via Internet is already commonplace between groups of seniors and this will inevitably increase as more people with these communications skills retire. Unless AIUTA moves quickly to establish itself as a progressive and truly representative body for all U3As, its functions and potential strengths could rapidly become redundant as U3A groups set up their own inexpensive national and international interactions with kindred groups.

The Third Age Trust. This network in the United Kingdom links some 46,000 members in more than 260 independent U3As, mainly in England. There is no compulsion for U3A groups to belong to the network, and a few exercise their right not to. Nevertheless, anecdotal reports suggest that the vast majority of members are delighted with the increased level of support, service and information which the Trust provides. A capitation fee of £1.35 per member, supplemented by occasional gifts from donors, supports a small office in London with four part time workers whose principal function is to compile Third Age News. This 24 page newsletter is distributed to members four times a year, and is a veritable mine of high quality information such as: challenging articles by adult educators; reports of innovative courses and approaches in specific U3A groups; reports on national and international happenings; the "Swap Shop" enabling member U3As to access used Open University course materials; conference information and reports; information on national and international study tours for members; letters to the editor; specific information about Subject Networks; and so forth.

The Subject Networks are a particularly interesting innovation for information exchange about specific teaching and learning ideas, and other activities. Currently there are nine of these networks, namely; Arts, Bird watching, Creative Writing, Genealogy, Language, Oral History, Science and Technology, Walking, and Travel. They are open to any interested member who belongs to the Trust. An example of the kind of activity supported by these networks comes from a recent Science/Technology newsletter. Members of this network were invited to a seminar/workshop near London which enabled them to be put in contact by satellite with researchers examining an active volcano off Hawaii. Other offerings included assistance with Internet projects, and an invitation to visit a new science centre.

Distance and expensive transportation militate against this level of collegiality in Australia. Nevertheless, some of the ideas could likely be adapted for our situation. For example, special interest group newsletters seem like an excellent way of linking U3A members

with similar interests throughout Australia and NZ. Members could exchange teaching and learning ideas and other information by mail, fax, and perhaps, in the very near future, the Internet. Special activities and meetings could be arranged by Subject Networks, for example during major U3A conferences where members may be more prepared to pay for the cost of travel.

The Elderhostel - ILR Network. U3A is not well known in North America apart from pockets of strength in French speaking Canada. Instead, Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILRs), which operate like a hybrid of both the French and self-help U3A models, have spread rapidly through both the USA and Canada. Like U3As following the French model each ILR must be sponsored by a university or college. However, educational, organisational and administrative decisions are the responsibilities of the members so, in this respect, they function like many U3As in Anglophone countries. Many of the courses are led by unpaid volunteers, although some involve paid faculty members from the host institution.

ILRs and Elderhostel have developed a joint network, which provides both organisations with mailing access to more than 600,000 older people interested in intellectually challenging activities. The network supports a wide range of services including a national newsletter; State and regional conferences; national and international programs; technical assistance to new and expanding groups; curriculum sharing; and, a national information centre which reports on innovative practices.

U3A Network - Victoria. A number of U3As outside Victoria receive copies of Network News, the official newsletter of the U3A network in Victoria, so the attributes of this body are probably quite widely known. The Network enables members to keep abreast of U3A developments locally, nationally and internationally, and provides a forum for discussion and dissemination of adult education information and ideas. A glance back at Table 2 shows that U3A growth in Victoria has been considerable. Almost certainly, this growth can be attributed to the coordinated promotion of the U3A ideal throughout the State, and the assistance and advice provided to emerging groups, by members of the Network. In fact, much of the growth of U3A in Australasia can be indirectly traced to Network members. For example, before U3A was introduced to Brisbane in 1986, considerable advice and assistance was provided by Jack McDonell from Melbourne. In turn, Brisbane U3A passed this advice to other emerging groups, and some of these subsequently helped other groups. The Network has since developed an extensive U3A "Starter Kit" and this has also been widely used in both countries.

Other Australasian U3A networks. Two networks operate in New South Wales. The NSW Council of U3A links most U3As in the State. Sydney U3A is not a member of the Council and, instead, operates its own network for the dozen or so independent branches in the Sydney region.

In West Australia a local network links the independent U3A groups in and around Perth.

The U3A Auckland Network links five U3As in the greater Auckland area and aims to assist with the formation of new U3As in the region.

An Australian U3A Information Network?

The foregoing information about successfully operating U3A networks in a number of countries, has set the scene for the following discussion about the establishment of a U3A Information Network.

I am well aware that the whole idea of a national network of U3As continues to be regarded with deep suspicion by many. During the combined South Australia - Victoria conference three years ago the issue was once again debated, and negated. The major problem, as I understand it, is that networks are seen by many to be the thin edge of the

wedge leading, ultimately, to regulation and loss of autonomy. I am reminded of a written response which I received from one Management Committee of a U3A in Queensland in 1989 when moves to start a regional U3A network were raised there. The Management Committee strenuously rejected the idea because members "have experienced a lifetime of bureaucracy and can see no benefit in introducing a layer of unnecessary officialdom when the organisation is running well". Interstate rivalries and concerns about "posturing" by individuals wishing to strut the national stage are also issues which create opposition.

However, once networks are established they seem to work well and, as discussed earlier, the potential benefits for all members are considerable. If a national network could be tested what might its principal roles entail? Some possibilities include:

- dissemination to members of information about innovative programs such as the U3A Sunraysia Spring School, which attracts U3A members from many States;
- planning and organisational assistance with national conferences;
- acting as a clearinghouse for teaching packages and course materials which could be purchased at cost by U3A groups and individual members. An example is the U3A Brisbane self-paced instruction booklets on MS Works for Windows;
- liaison with U3A groups internationally and two way reporting of information;
- establishment of Subject Networks, perhaps along the lines of those developed by The Third Age Trust in the U.K;
- coordination of national responses to government and other bodies concerned with the development of late life educational opportunities;
- maintaining listings of retired professionals such as tax experts, accountants, lawyers, and so forth, who would be prepared to provide advice to members; and,
- taking over compilation and distribution of the U3A Directory.

The list is indicative only of the range of services which could be provided by a national network. Each of the suggested services is concerned with better information flow. I can see no advantages in activities like maintaining a national register of members, or holding regular State/Territory meetings. Thus, to minimise individuals' concerns about creeping bureaucracies, an envisaged network should be developed solely as an information network. Further, to minimise regional rivalries, all States and Territories should be represented on the U3A Information Network and, as far as possible, there should be little in the way of a hierarchical structure.

The following mechanism suggests a way by which this might be achieved quite inexpensively. Representatives on the U3A Information Network would meet only by teleconference. This technique has been used effectively in a wide variety of circumstances to link people isolated by distance. For example, in our research activities with both frail and healthy ageing groups, we have used teleconferences to successfully link isolated groups of people who had not previously met (Swindell and Mayhew, in press). After a brief period, during which participants become accustomed to the novelty of, say, 8 or 10 people taking part in a meeting by telephone, they forget all about the process and treat the teleconference as if it were a simple telephone conversation which follows a few simple communication rules.

Prior to each U3A Information Network teleconference, an agenda and outline of items to be discussed would have been exchanged by letters or fax (or, in the very near future, by electronic mail). At the appointed time, each representative on the U3A Information Network would be phoned by Telecom in her/his home and linked to everyone else in the conference. To minimise difficulties with people trying to speak over each other a chairperson would have been elected by the group, and this person would chair the meeting and invite each participant in turn to respond to agenda items.

This type of meeting has been shown to have a number of hidden benefits. For example, during the airline pilots' strike several years ago, many businesses were forced to conduct

meetings by teleconference because executives were unable to travel to central venues for face-to-face meetings. They embraced the idea enthusiastically, not only because of the savings in travel time and money, but also because of the efficient way in which information was exchanged. Less of the time consuming and often repetitive discussion which characterises many face-to-face meetings seems to occur in teleconferences.

Teleconferencing would allow representatives of the U3A Information Network to be drawn from anywhere at all, location is irrelevant. As an example, the U3A Information Network representatives might initially comprise:

Network Chairperson	U3A Ballerat
Network Secretary	U3A Hobart
Network Treasurer	U3A Darwin
Newsletter Editor	U3A-ACT

Other Network representatives from U3A Cairns, U3A Shoalhaven, U3A Mt Gambier, and U3A Geraldton.

The roles of each of the eight representatives would be to facilitate two way information between the U3As in her/his own State or Territory. Every year the membership could change.

Costs and funding

Teleconferences to different States cost $44 per person per hour, regardless of distance, plus a $10 connection fee. Thus, to connect the eight representatives of the U3A Information Network for one hour would cost $362. If four newsletters were required during the year the annual teleconferencing cost would be around $1400. Once each newsletter had been compiled and printed, one copy would be sent by each representative to every U3A in his/her State/Territory. The individual Management Committees would be requested to print all or as much of the information as they liked, and to distribute this along with the usual newsletters to members. Although this distribution mechanism would involve each U3A in additional printing costs and, perhaps, higher mailing costs than is normally associated with the campus newsletters, it would ensure that individual U3As retain a coordinating role over the distributed information.

In addition to the teleconferencing costs, every network representative would run up additional phone and mailing costs during their roles of liaising closely with each U3A group in her/his State. The Secretary may also need to lease a fax machine, and the Newsletter Editor lease a word processor. These, and allied costs, must be fully reimbursed.

If each U3A is prepared to carry the distribution costs to individual members, the U3A Information Network cost could surely be kept to less than $5000 per year. Currently, there are more than 26,000 U3A members in Australia. A capitation fee of only 20 cents per member would provide more than $5000.

Although the above may look simple on paper, the idea would still face a number of obstacles before it could be tested.

First, members are unlikely to agree to provide even 20 cents a year to support a U3A Information Network without some concrete understanding of what the information means for them. To bypass this problem it may be necessary to seek funding from outside U3A, for a short period, in order to demonstrate the network's value to members.

Second, to minimise problems of territorialism, Management Committees must be prepared to subsidise the distribution of network information. While some U3As would doubtlessly welcome the idea of providing additional substantial information for members, others may already produce quite bulky newsletters and the additional network

material may well force postage costs into a higher bracket. Paper and printing is also expensive. For example, it costs approximately 5 cents to print one side of a standard page. Thus, a modest U3A Information Network newsletter comprising only two sheets printed front and back would cost an extra 20 cents a member, or 80 cents per member per year for four issues. Some U3As on tight budgets may find difficulty in providing this additional service to members.

In discussing this subsidy it is important to recognise that the cost is a per member cost, which is independent of the membership size. One representative of a large U3A with whom I discussed the idea, thought it unfair that a 20 cent levy per member for a 1000-strong membership would amount to $200, whereas a small U3A with 50 members would pay only $10. The point is that the network information is for individual members not for U3A Management Committees. Provided the information is distributed to the individual U3A member the size of the organisation is immaterial; each member pays 20 cents to support the network and each receives identical information. The same reasoning applies to distribution costs at the campus level.

Third, it is unlikely that all U3As will choose to support the network. If several large groups elect not to participate how could budgetary shortfalls be met?

The major issues of perceived creeping bureaucracy and territorialism have guided my thinking in framing the above. It remains to be seen whether there is sufficient interest, good will and enthusiasm to support the idea, or some modification of it, in the near future. The low budget option clearly has pitfalls but, possibly, far fewer than would a full budget option involving the central production and mailing of 26,000 newsletters to individual members.

Looking ahead

Earlier it was stated that U3A in Australasia is unlikely merely to be a transient adult education phenomenon. Additional support for this assertion can be drawn from demographic projections and adult education studies.

In almost every country the ageing comprise the fastest growing sector of the population. The situation is no different in Australia or New Zealand. On demographic grounds alone it seems reasonable to expect that sustained growth in U3A will continue.

However, the best predictor of late life involvement in adult education is the amount of prior education received. Study after study verifies the finding that education seems to be habitual; those who seek late life educational opportunities tend to have been well educated in early life. The same holds true for Australian U3A members. Table 3 shows that people with above average levels of education tend be attracted to U3As.

Table 3: Highest level of formal education attained by participants (n=758)

Qualification	%	
Higher degree	3.7	(n=28)
Degree	17.4	(n=132)
Undergraduate diploma	8.2	(n=62)
Business, technical or trade	19.7	(n=149)
Completed secondary	33.9	(n=257)
Less than 2 years secondary	11.2	(n=85)
Primary	5.9	(n=28)

These data came from a postal survey of a random sample of 780 members from 12 U3A groups in Queensland, New South Wales, and South Australia, which was carried out

several years ago (Swindell, 1993). Although the actual results of the survey are now dated the educational profile is likely to be reasonably similar for current U3A members. During the great depression, and right up until World War II, few families could afford the luxury of sending their children for schooling beyond the compulsory primary school years. Thus, the great majority of Australian people who are currently aged 60 years and over, did not progress beyond primary school. In addition, it was unfashionable for young women in those times to seek higher education. Since the considerable majority of U3A members are women who lived through these difficult times, the data in Table 3 support the view that U3A members have much higher formal educational experiences than average for the cohort.

Successive cohorts are better educated than their predecessors. Therefore, it is possible to state with some confidence that U3As will continue to attract increasing numbers of people who are prepared to make the effort to remain mentally alert. However, there is one important proviso to this forecast. U3A management must remain receptive to the evolving needs of members, or run the risk of the organisation stagnating. To illustrate the importance of moving with the times I would like to very briefly refer to a study which a colleague and I have recently completed about voluntary groups which older people belong to. Data were obtained by lengthy personal interviews with more than 200 older people who belonged to a variety of leisure time organisations. Incidentally, the interviews were carried out by five paid research assistants from U3A. Research and U3A is a subject to which I will return later. We believe that many Senior Citizens clubs, which have been so popular with older people for years, may have outlived their value to the ageing community (Mayhew and Swindell, in press). Many Senior Citizens clubs with ageing volunteer managements are struggling to keep the interest of a dwindling membership. The majority of members who remain loyal to the organisation tend to belong to the "old-old" category who enjoy concerts, bingo, bus trips and hobbies. More recent cohorts of active ageing people are no longer attracted to this type of organisation. To guard against the possibility of becoming marginal to the interests of new groups of active ageing members, U3As must maintain an outward looking focus and be prepared to experiment with new ideas. Part of this wider community vision may well be enhanced by belonging to a U3A Information Network which, in turn, is in frequent communication with other networks for like minded people.

A further portent for the long term future of U3As and similar organisations which promote Third Age education is the emerging link between later life cognitive challenge and good health. People who continue to exercise their intellects in later life perhaps may live in better health than those who do not. Langer (1989), a social psychologist at Harvard, is an advocate for this position. In summarising the pool of evidence which appears to support her view, Langer was moved to "...make the strong claim that the body begins to die as the mind ceases to deal with novelty" (p. 142). If Langer's and other researchers' ideas are correct, then U3A and similar groups which promote late life cognitive challenge would appear to have a major role to play in the promotion of healthy ageing. Even if these views can not be unequivocally proven, older adults who continue to actively use their intellects are more likely to remain better informed about the range of options available for helping them to maximise their independence, than are those who do not.

A research role for U3A?

The high levels of formal education and expertise amongst the U3A membership suggests an additional intellectually challenging activity which some U3As may regard as worthy of support, namely constituency research. A new agenda for research into ageing in Australia (Department of Health, Housing and Community Services, 1991) calls for a move towards the study of models of "successful ageing" and away from the "inevitable decline" focus which dominates so much of ageing research. Moreover, the paper suggests that greater emphasis should be placed on constituency research in which the focus is shifted away from the idea of "research on" the ageing and towards "inquiry

among" the ageing. The idea of constituency research is encapsulated nicely by Job (in Hicks, 1991) who observed that "the aged themselves (in cooperation with professionals) are preeminently the most suitable to guide and carry out research into what they consider are the most important factors in successful ageing, and into the most practical means of implementing these once they're identified" (p. 12). Wherever possible then, studies of older people should be conducted by older interviewers.

U3A in Australia appears to be an organisation which is tailor-made for a leadership role in constituency research. As Table 3 showed, many of the members have high qualifications; 17 per cent of participants hold a degree and four per cent a higher degree. In total, 49 per cent have completed a post-secondary qualification, a level of expertise which is almost certain to be quite considerably higher than that of most large, open organisations for Australians of similar age. In addition, the principal reason members are attracted to U3A is their search for new knowledge. Thus, two key requisites for research, namely expertise and a desire for intellectual challenge, are characteristics possessed by many U3A members. Indeed, some U3As have recognised that research is a suitable addition to the range of intellectually stimulating options available to members, and have supported research projects which have the potential to benefit the wider ageing community. The lack of communication between most of the independent groups is a major impediment to obtaining information about the full extent of these activities. Nevertheless, the following limited summary serves to indicate the potential which U3A has for contributing to new knowledge. Ongoing or completed projects initiated by U3A, or carried out in association with academic research groups, include:

- a survey of the wider ageing population to determine how U3A might better meet community needs by Shoalhaven and Hawthorn U3As;
- a study of transport problems faced by the older populations in highly delocalised communities by the Sunshine Coast U3A;
- an educational/cultural exchange with Japanese women over the age of 60 with a view to introducing U3A ideas to Japan, jointly sponsored by Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast and Brisbane U3As;
- a program using computers to help develop hand-eye coordination and improve the short-term memory of stroke victims, carried out by U3A Orange in association with TAFE;
- teleconferencing as a means of providing programs of intellectual stimulus for housebound frail elderly people, carried out by Griffith University researchers in association with Brisbane U3A;
- a study of voluntary groups to which older people belong. This study involved five U3A members who were paid as researcher assistants to carry out more than 200 face-to-face interviews, and;
- a survey of how older Queenslanders receive support information. This study entailed paid volunteers from several U3As throughout the State conducting surveys with randomly chosen older individuals.

These examples demonstrate that some Australian U3A groups are interested in extending their range of activities to include research. A U3A Research Network would be one possible subject network which might function effectively at a distance, once a U3A Information Network is established.

Despite the U3A movement's apparent suitability for supporting constituency research, a cautionary note must be sounded about the possible negative consequences that this potentially exclusive activity could have on the membership. Australian U3As attract mainly middle-class people with above average levels of education for their age group. However, as Table 3 shows, 17% of members have two years or less of secondary schooling as their highest formal education background and the majority of these were aged 75 and older. The self-help approach to U3A appeals to older people from a wide cross-section of age and educational backgrounds. It would be a very considerable loss to adult education if U3A in Australasia were to change in a way that tended to create real

or imagined barriers which exclude the "old-old" and others with limited formal educational experience.

In some countries questions have been raised about the appropriateness of the word "university" in the U3A title, because the organisation does not have a research objective. For the most part, proponents of the self-help model have firmly rejected such elitist and exclusive views, and concentrated on keeping the organisation open to all who believe they are in their Third Age, and who are interested in challenging their intellects. At best, research involvement is likely to appeal to only a minute proportion of the ageing population. Thus, my suggestion that U3As of the future might have a role to play in constituency research should be viewed in the context of research being but one of a wide range of intellectually stimulating opportunities promoted by U3A. Members should remain free to become involved or not. This is not a suggestion that U3As will dramatically change tack to embrace research in the future.

Greater links with tertiary education?

Although U3As operate without direct financial assistance from external organisations, almost all are heavily reliant on indirect support. For example, some groups receive free, or subsidised office space provided by city councils, adult education organisations, commercial organisations, and the like. In many cases courses are also run from "free" community facilities. Hidden subsidies contribute substantially to the success of the U3A self-help approach and, hopefully, will continue to do so. Many older people with fixed incomes could not afford to pay for full cost recovery educational services.

A growing number of Australian U3As have also developed successful relationships with universities and colleges. Some of the advantages from these liaisons include member access to a variety of high level educational resources of the kind which would be very difficult, or prohibitively expensive, to provide by other means. Examples include, access by U3A members to library, audio visual and computing resources, assistance from adult educators, and specialist classrooms and lecture theatres for "one-of" activities like seminars and conferences, and so forth. Some tertiary institutions have introduced provision for members to "audit" normal lecture programs, without charge, and they may also run occasional specialist lecture series specifically for U3A. These latter activities are supplementary to the usual U3A program of courses run by volunteer member tutors and should not be seen as the beginnings of dependence by U3A on Second Age professionals. Management Committees oversee all U3A related activities in the normal way.

The comparatively small number of U3As which have developed successful relationships with tertiary education providers recognise the advantages their members have over U3A members who do not have access to similar levels of support. However, not all attempts at developing relationships with universities and colleges have been successful. Some requests have been bluntly refused. In fact Monash U3A, one of the first groups to be established in Australia, was asked to leave the university after operating there successfully for several years.

The climate for liaisons with tertiary education institutions is now considerably more favourable than it was only two or three years ago. In contrast to TAFE colleges, which have always had a strong community focus, few universities, until recently, appeared interested in developing direct links with the local community. However, a considerable change has been forced on the traditional Australian university culture during the past three years. Now, as part of its commitment to Quality Assurance, each university is required to provide to funding bodies, very substantial annual documentation detailing the university's roles in research, teaching and community. The emphasis is on evidence not on stated intention. Tens of millions of dollars are awarded annually on the basis of how successful individual universities have been in competing with each other in each of the three categories. Therefore, it is not surprising that a number of universities are openly

delighted to demonstrate their commitment to the community through the close alliances they have formed with groups like U3A. In the past year alone several U3A groups have been actively courted by universities.

Universities also stand to benefit in other ways from alliances with U3As. Because U3As tend to attract qualified and motivated older people some members would more than likely be able to assist with suitable university research activities, particularly those having a focus on ageing. Several constituency research projects involving U3A members and university or college personnel were outlined earlier. U3A members have also assisted universities in occasional administrative activities, or have been recruited to act as guides during exhibitions and open days. On a slightly more speculative tack, a university's public image may also benefit in intangible ways from an association with U3A. For example, some U3A members held high level positions in politics, commerce and other influential areas of life before they retired, and some maintain networks or direct contacts with community leaders. Networks of this kind could directly assist the university in raising its profile within the wider community. As a further speculative example of the benefits of a symbiotic relationship between U3As and tertiary institutions, the latter have ready access to excellent communications systems including the Internet. This medium provides very inexpensive and almost immediate communications around the world, and a number of older people are currently using universities' electronic networks to good advantage. As communications between U3As strengthen, both within Australasia and around the world, U3As could become increasingly influential in shaping the future of late life adult education. A close association with an influential organisation which has a voice in the policy and practise of education for increasing numbers of active, reasonably affluent older people, would likely be regarded as an asset by many universities.

Although many universities may now be more receptive to the idea of developing close relationships with U3As, considerable preliminary preparation is advisable before raising the idea with very senior university personnel. Many Vice Chancellors and other senior administrators will probably know little if anything about U3A. When proposing a relationship these administrators should be presented with a solution rather than a problem. One way of doing this would be to discuss the possibilities with an adult educator, perhaps within a Faculty of Education in the university. An adult educator will almost certainly have heard of U3A and, if sympathetic to the request, he/she may be happy to suggest to the Dean how the Faculty might be able to assist, for example by providing office space, furniture, access to library and specialist teaching resources, and so forth. After "in principle" support has been obtained, the Dean, together with a small delegation comprising U3A members who fully understand the university culture, for example, retired academics, diplomats, executives and so forth, would arrange to meet with the Vice Chancellor to further emphasise the reciprocal advantages of a relationship. By presenting the Vice Chancellor with a solution it is more likely that the desired outcome will be achieved than if he/she has to worry about the mechanics of how such a relationship might occur.

Conclusion

In this paper I have covered a number of ideas which may or may not trigger some response. Data were presented which supports the position that the U3A movement in Australasia is growing strongly. I argued that U3A is likely to continue to grow but the potential dangers of the organisation's failure to adapt to the quite rapidly changing needs of successive cohorts of older people were also highlighted. The summary of successful U3A networks which operate in a number of different countries was used to underpin my argument that we too could benefit by developing better communications with other U3As in the region, as well as with similar groups globally. The mechanics of how a low budget communications network might operate could provide a framework against which alternatives might be compared. Constituency research was argued to be an appropriate

and outward looking adjunct to existing activities, and some of the two-way benefits of a friendly relationship with a tertiary institution were explored.

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